

Deconstruction Theory and Practice: A Deconstructive Reading of the Idea of Kashmiriyat through Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown*

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Abstract

This paper attempts to explore the theoretical paradigm named, Deconstruction since its inception from Structuralist thoughts. The focus is on how it differs from Structuralism and how Derrida appropriates Structuralist assumptions to suit his own purpose and at the same time, to subvert Saussure's formulation of meaning-making system. The paper concerns itself with how the play of endless chain of signifiers is initiated through the act of reading and writing and how a deconstructive reading would unravel what lies beneath the apparent structural unity of a particular text. At the end of the paper, I attempt a deconstructive reading of the idea of Kashmiriyat in the context of the violent political turbulence that stormed the valley in the post 1990s. This article incorporates a reading of Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown*, which subverts what Rushdie's discourse apparently seems to assert. The purpose of the article is to apply the deconstructive theoretical framework to analyse not only a text, but also a collective imaginary regarding Kashmir.

KEYWORDS- Structuralism, Deconstruction, Language, Meaning-making, Kashmiriyat.

Poststructuralism refers to a series of critical theories that were developed in mid twentieth century as an intellectual response to its immediate predecessor, Structuralism. But, it is not the only reason for labelling this theoretical development as Poststructuralism. While recognizing the importance of structure, conceptualized by Saussure, Poststructuralist theorists, such as Jacques Derrida, Judith Butler and Gilles Deleuze contested the notion of totality and closure of meaning within a linguistic system. Though Saussure presumes the relationship between a signifier and signified as arbitrary, the Structuralist insistence is on the completeness of meaning. Structuralism, thus obstructs the multiplicity of meaning, involved in the process of signification. On the contrary, Poststructuralism insists that meaning is not embedded within a particular sign. Each sign is inhabited by other signs and eventually, initiates an endless play of signifiers. Therefore, it closes the possibility of any immediate, absolute, unitary meaning. Judith Butler, in her book *Gender Trouble*, asserts that Poststructuralism "refutes the claims of totality and universality and the presumption of binary structural oppositions that implicitly operate to quell the insistent ambiguity and openness of linguistic and cultural signification. As a result, the discrepancy between signifier and signified becomes the operative and limitless difference of language, rendering all referentiality into a potentially limitless displacement" (Butler, 40).

Deconstruction is primarily described as a philosophical position which repudiates the presupposed superiority, given to western metaphysical tradition. Derrida says, "In a traditional philosophical opposition we have not a peaceful coexistence of facing terms but a violent hierarchy. One of the terms dominates the other (axiologically, logically etc) occupies the commanding position. To deconstruct the opposition, is

above all, at a particular moment, to reverse hierarchy” (Positions, 56-57/41). Though the first task of deconstruction is to find the opposition and dismantle the hierarchical structure, it does not attempt to abolish the structure completely. It is assumed that structure is necessary to convey sense and meaning. Deconstruction focuses more on the importance of differences within a particular structure.

Derrida was quite sceptical about the term deconstruction; it was a term he has never liked and its meteoric rise in the realm of critical theory surprised him. In Letter to a Japanese Friend, he evades any possible definition of the term Deconstruction. Deconstructive traits, as Derrida asserts, are self-evident in language and philosophy; it is an intrinsic part of the whole discourse and it ‘happens’ naturally. Though the term Deconstruction to name his philosophical proposition comes “spontaneously”, Derrida claims to have a ‘little thought’ while he appropriates and adopts the Heideggerian word “destruktion” and “abbau” to suit his own propositions. The sense of the word “destruktion” in Heidegger, is far from being negative as the traditional meaning of the term suggests (Kamuf, 270-271). Rather Heidegger contends, “we must...stake out the positive possibilities of that tradition....this destruction does not relate itself toward the past; its criticism is aimed at “today” and at the prevalent way of treating the history of ontology.... its aim is positive; its negative function remains unexpressed and indirect”(Heidegger, 22). In Being and Time, he attempts to ‘loosen’ up the solidified tradition of western metaphysics and at the same time, tries to access the primordial sources from which the concepts and traditions are handed down to shape our own understanding. The word “abbau”, in German, refers to “gradual removal” or “mining”. Heideggerian use of the term initiates a process of gradually removing concealments from hardened philosophical tradition. Though Heidegger’s attempt to question the solidarity of western metaphysics influenced Derrida in a significant way, Derrida does not find ‘destruktion’ an adequate phrase to convey what he contends. Moreover, in French, the word ‘destruktion’, Derrida says, refers to annihilation or a negative reduction which seems similar to Nietzschean “demolition” (Kamuf, 271).

However, Derrida’s appropriation of the term Deconstruction is influenced by what Lemare claims in Cours de langue Latine - “of deconstruction, common way of saying construction.” It, in a way, indicates Deconstruction’s unique positionality- to situate itself within the realm of structuralism and then, to initiate criticism by using Structuralist assumptions. Moreover, the entry of ‘Deconstruction’ in La Litre refers to “se deconstruire”- to deconstruct itself. Villemain says in Preface du Dictionnaire de L’ Academie, that a language is deconstructed after reaching its own state of perfection (271). It supports Derridian claim that the traits of Deconstruction are embedded within a language, within a text, within a corpus of texts, and also within ‘hardened’ philosophical traditions. There is a site of “undecidability” within a text where the text most obviously subverts its own rhetorical structure and deconstructs its structural unity. The point of “undecidability” is termed as aporia in Derridian discourse which literally means an “impassable path” or “irresolvable contradiction”. Structuralism assumes structure as an essential feature of a linguistic system. Derrida argues that each and every structure posits a unique centre from which everything emanates and recedes. The structure, for its sustenance, depends on the centre and at the same time, it is assumed that a centre creates and holds the integrity of the structure. It leads Derrida to claim that “...the centre is, paradoxically, within the structure and outside it. The centre is the centre of the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality has its centre elsewhere” (Writing and Difference, 352). Thus

Derrida problematizes the notion of “centred structure” and eventually, the structure has become “decentred”. For example, in a literary text, the author acts as a centre who is both an insider and outsider to the structure of the text. He is the one who organizes the structure but not an essential part of the structure.

Derrida’s point of departure from Structuralism is marked by his focus on diacritical nature of language- language, for meaning, is dependent on differential economy of signs. Saussure argues that any linguistic system is ‘synchronic’ in essence, and therefore, there is a structural relation between the isolated speech act or individual utterances (parole) and the abstract conventions of a signifying system (langue). In langue, Saussure contends, meanings underlie and pre-exist, without which any meaningful individual utterance would never become possible. Derrida, on the contrary, focuses more on the free play of signs within a particular structure. He disagrees with Saussurian notion of pre-existed meaning within a linguistic system. A sign acquires meaning through its difference with other signs and it is a point where Structuralism and Poststructuralism agree. What Derrida did more, is to indicate that this difference embodies within itself a deference- a delay in the process of signification. A signifier leads to a signified and that signified, in turn, is a signifier and leads to another signified- thus an endless play of signifiers is initiated. It is termed as Differance; Derrida coins the term to convey both the notion of difference and deference. Here, he adopts the French verb “differer” which indicates two meanings- one is “to differ” or to make distinction and the other is “to defer” or to delay. Moreover, the sign contains within itself a track of other signifiers which it does not indicate and from which it differentiates. Trace, in Derridian discourse, refers to what a sign does not connote in the meaning-making process. But, it inevitably, comes to mind as a sign for its meaning depends on its differentiation with other signs. It disrupts the assumption of presence and inheritance of a singular, unitary meaning within a particular sign. Differance, thus, is a recognition of differential nature of language and it is central to understand how Deconstruction refutes Structuralism’s claim of linguistic structurality.

Philosophy has been famously described by Derrida as a “metaphysics of presence” (qtd. in Culler, 92). In a classical philosophical opposition, we find not a peaceful co-existence but rather a violent hierarchy of contesting terms. The superior term has always the higher presence and the other term is characterized by negation and most importantly, by absence. Culler asserted that “the authority of presence, its power to valorisation, structures all our thinking.... To claim, as in the Cartesian cogito, that the “I” resists radical doubt because it is present to itself in the act of thinking or doubting is one sort of appeal to the presence. Another is the notion that the meaning of an utterance is what is present to the consciousness of the speaker, what he or she “has in mind” at the moment of utterance” (94). Derrida in his attempt to dismantle or deconstruct the “metaphysics of presence” argued that presence should be defined in terms of absence, in terms of what the presence is not. Thus, Deconstruction focuses on the qualities of absence to formulate what is presence; presence is perceived as a result of absence.

Derrida in *Of Grammatology* was critical about the western metaphysical tradition of placing speech over writing. Philosophers write their propositions, but at the same time, they believe that it should not be written. Writing is considered as an act which is irrelevant and it serves as a barrier to the thought it represents. An American philosopher, Richard Rorty speculates that “writing is an unfortunate necessity” (qtd.

in Culler, 90). Derrida borrows the notion of supplement from Rousseau, who conceived “supplement as an inessential extra added to something complete in itself” (Culler, 103). Rousseau surmises writing as a supplement in philosophical tradition. On the contrary, Derrida argued that a thing which is complete in itself could not contain “an inessential extra”, rather it indicates an absence or void. A supplement is necessary to fulfil the lack or absence in the original text. Thus, it exists within the ‘original’ or ‘natural’, but at the same time, it belongs outside the original framework as it is not an intrinsic part of the text. Derrida suggests that supplement embodies both these notions – accretion as well as substitution. (103) Writing is an example of supplement as writing takes the place of speech that already exists, yet resides outside the domain of speech.

Moreover, the importance of speech over writing refers to Logocentrism which is characterized by a desire to direct and immediate access to meaning. Logocentrism views writing exterior to speech and speech is an exterior to thought. Speech embodies a presence- the speaker’s presence for the listener. Writing features an absence- an absence of a persona and Derrida says that writing is an attempt to restore the presence of speech. From this perspective, writing is seen as external to thought and a form of mediated expression. It has the vulnerability to affect or distort the intended meaning. But, Derrida argues in *Of Grammatology*, “writing is not a sign of a sign, except if one says it of all signs, which would be more profoundly true” (43). In Derridian discourse, writing is not only an act of transforming phonic signifiers to graphic signifiers, but also it is a practice which denotes the structure of the text from philosophical, social and ideological perspectives. In this way, Derrida widens the scope of writing by focusing on the ruptures and disjunctions of what the written word tries to convey and what it actually conveys. His adaptation of the term *Arche-Writing* assumes writing to be as comprehensive as speech and attempts to liberate writing from its detrimental status. Moreover, *Arche-Writing* refers to an preliminary form of writing which precedes both speech and writing and it would never summon forth what it intends to mean because the written word always deferred or postponed the meaning and one reading is totally different from other.

Though Deconstruction is primarily applied to question the privileged status of Western metaphysics, it was readily accepted as a method to analyse and re-interpret literature and culture in United States. Considering the assumption that language, particularly written language, is intrinsically ambiguous and consists of a multiplicity of meaning, it can be argued that deconstruction subverts what a literary text appears to convey. It focuses more on what it does not convey, it is an attempt to give voice to that which has been systematically silenced. Moreover, it questions the notion of coherence, unity and meaning that a text is thought to embody. A final, absolute reading is never possible, for each act of reading is differentiated by its interaction with place, time and the positionality that a reader assumes. It gives each act of reading a new meaning and Derrida supported the absence of a stable meaning by arguing that there is no transcendental signified- there is no end of referentiality and eventually, there is no ultimate, singular or unitary understanding.

Deconstructive reading “must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of language he uses” (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 158). The process of deconstructive analysis of a text echoes what Formalism does, but the outcome is vastly different. Both Deconstruction and Formalism employ close reading- a reader should note the

presence and absence of linguistic elements, related to the intended sense of the text; while Formalism asserts a text's structural unity despite the presence of paradoxes and irony, Deconstruction negates the possibility of any textual unity and views the text as it is only an amalgamation of conflicting meanings. Derrida says that a method of "double reading" would reveal what remains hidden beneath the apparent structural unity of the text. The first reading would focus on the linguistic elements of the text that runs alongside what the text intends to say. In the second reading, the reader would look for alternative meanings, concealed within the text. The presence of contradictory and incompatible meanings disintegrate the ground on which the text rests.

Now, I would like to attempt a deconstructive reading of the idea of Kashmiriyat in the context of decades-long conflict that stormed the valley of Kashmir since 1990s. Kashmiriyat is a form of cultural syncretism and it represents Kashmir as a paradise on earth where peace, love and brotherhood prevail, despite the ethnic and religious differences. It refers to a vision for a peaceful future where two contesting communities would co-exist, and it seems to be imposed upon the Kashmiri people. Moreover, it is used to wrap them as a homogenous entity. Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown* apparently seems to be an attempt to show the utopic vision of Kashmiriyat through the marriage of a Hindu girl, Boonyi and a Muslim boy, Shalimar, but a close reading of the text would reveal something utterly complex within this utopic imagination. It brings forth the ruptures and disjunctions that already lie within the notion of Kashmiriyat. The marriage of Shalimar and Boonyi was undoubtedly, the closest thing towards a harmonious culture, but a deconstructive reading would argue that it is an event which shows the impossibility of existing together as the gap between the two communities are too wide to be bridged. Moreover, Kashmiriyat may seem a comforting idea to the Indian nation state to celebrate the notion of 'unity' in diversity. But for a Kashmiri youth who has witnessed the atrocities that the Indian army had unleashed upon them, Kashmiriyat is a 'lost ideal'; it is something that had the potential to be great but dismantled and mangled by the state apparatus. Therefore, Kashmiriyat depends for its meaning and implication on the context and the positionality of the perceiver. It embodies within itself a plethora of contesting narratives; thereby, it has deferred and postponed and delayed an absolute, singular or unitary understanding.

Thus a deconstructive analysis of Rushdian discourse would show how it undermines the construct (Kashmiriyat), it apparently asserts. The text contains elements that has already annihilated the base, knowingly or unknowingly, our task is just to find those out. Deconstruction, as Miller proclaims, "is not a dismantling of the structure of a text but a demonstration it has already dismantled itself" (341). Miller further supports Derrida by asserting the impossibility of defining deconstruction in generalized terms. Deconstruction can best be manifested through the act of exemplification, and at the same time, one should remember that the examples would differ.

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